

# Nationalism in the Meiji Restoration\*

Mitani, Hiroshi

Meiji Ishin (Meiji Restoration: 明治維新) was a revolution based on nationalism. During the mid 19th century, the Japanese had visioned the threat of aggression from western nations if demands to open the country were met. In order to oppose this threat, Japan made a bold reform with the state organization. This reform was not only limited to politics, but also covered a wide range of populace rights. Due to this, Japan transformed from a static society of Tokugawa period to a modernizing society. Therefore, Meiji Restoration opened a path to constitutional monarchy and industrialization which were similar to the revolutions and reforms in western nations during this same period. But concerning the objective and motive of the reform itself, there is a major difference as to the exclusively vital function that nationalism had played.

The main objective of this paper is the analysis of the role of nationalism during Meiji Restoration. First of all, changes in political along with social structures, and sacrifice will be analyzed. Secondly, the political process which caused the changes and lastly, the role of nationalism during the Restoration will be considered.

## Part 1. Structural Changes and its Sacrifice

Today, it is considered that Meiji Restoration is the changes in polity along with the social transformation which occurred during the 25 years between the arrival of Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1853

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until the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877. But in order to fully understand the changes during that period, it will be necessary to compare Japan in 1853 and 1877.

### (1) Changes within the Government Structure

In 1853, Japan was ruled by the united states of Daimyos (feudal lord of a fief) organized and controlled by Bakufu (government of Tokugawa, the shogunate). The basic unit was the daimyo state which had territories designated by bakufu and controlled the administration, taxation and justice sectors. The power was passed down by heritage only to the Bushi (samuraiwarrior) class, furthermore, this bushi class was also divided in numerous lesser status groups. There were approximately 260 daimyo family states of various sizes. The largest was Tokugawa shogunate which controlled one fourth of Japan. Tokugawa regulated the daimyos by monopolizing supreme powers such as the right to command the military, diplomatic rights, authority to supervise the Royal Court and mintage rights. As for the Cabinet members and bureaucrats, included were middle size and small daimyos, and lesser vassals of Tokugawa. The large daimyos regardless of their kin relationship with Tokugawa shogunate were eliminated. Needless to say, the daimyo vassals were not able to participate in bakufu politics. Emperor's royal court, in terms of status like issuing the official rank to Tokugawa and other bushi, was above the bakufu. As for power, the royal court followed laws set by bakufu, also did not possess any military power and was constantly under the control of the bakufu.

The form of government during Tokugawa period was such that nucleus of power and the origin of authority were divided. The power was decentralized and people included within the power structure were limited to certain status order.

Japan in 1877, on the contrary was ruled by Meiji government, a single polity which was organized under the emperor. The emperor was placed in a position of authority but also legitimized the policy

and laws of the government directly. Moreover, Meiji government, absorbed the domains of various daimyos as well as the bakufu and sent district officials to rule directly. Also, status discrimination against official positions were greatly eased. The center of the decision making process was in the hands of few, composed mainly by former court nobility and former daimyo vassals. On the other hand, once daimyos were eliminated, non-bushi by birth accounted for 20% within the government structure as a whole. During this period, status order itself was abolished with the exception of Peerage class which consisted of former members of the court nobility and daimyos. Bushi lost their income from heritage. In other words, the political system after Meiji Restoration was highly centralized, and in principle a semiclassless government was created as an aftermath.

On the otherhand, the relationship between government and the people changed as explained below. In terms of taxation, agricultural tax was transformed to a new land tax, which was collected by a nation wide uniform standard and rather than rice, only cash was to be collected. Due to this change, for the government, taxation was eased greatly. As for the farmers, the right to own private property was recognized. Moreover, the government abolished compulsory labor but the masses were drafted by the military. In terms of populace involvement in politics, official positions were opened to all in principle. Council for learning western decision making manners was organized and petitions were officially allowed. In 1875, constitutional politics was announced to be implemented and four years later, perfectural assembly was to convene.

## **(2) Social Reforms: A Path to Liberalism and Modernization**

Meiji government greatly relaxed the status order, and freedoms of travel, habitation, occupation and marriage were no longer restricted. The aim of the policy of levelling and freedom was to encourage social activities of the populace, in order to expand national power. Thus it

was combined with inducement plans for enlightenment and industrialization. Such as the effort of acquiring western knowledge, proclamation of the compulsory education system, state schools and state factories. This step coincided with the liberation and will of the people for an improved lifestyle. Therefore, modernization became institutionalized.

### (3) Sacrifice

An abrupt political-social reform creates strong friction and often numerous victims are found. In general, Meiji Restoration was developed during the political negotiations, but still civil war, assassinations and punishments couldn't escape the period. As for the civil war between 1868 to 1869, both sides lost approximately, at least 8,200 people. The 1877 Satsuma rebellion had lost 6,300 people only among the government troops. Therefore, with these two lone incidents, approximately 20,000 people had lost their lives. Also, the Choshu rebellion in 1866, foreign wars during the late period of bakufu rule, minor revolts by the former bushi class during Meiji period, punishments and assassinations altogether, the death toll for Meiji Restoration will probably come close to 30,000 people. But, this figure compared to other revolutions, the death toll is not necessarily high. For example, during the French Revolution approximately 30,000 people died from punishments just in Paris alone. Add on the death total for civil and foreign wars, the total will be ten times the amount of Meiji Restoration. Russian and Chinese revolution probably had more deaths compared to the French Revolution. Therefore Meiji Restoration compared to other modern revolutions, had a smaller sacrifice but made a greater impact with reform. What was the reason for this. Next will be the analysis of the political process of Meiji Restoration.

## Part 2. Political Process

In simplified terms the political process of Meiji Restoration had

been understood as the following. The western threat of intervention worried lower bushi of Satsuma and Choshu states. They tried to use the authority of the royal court and made an attempt at setting off the expulsion war. Furthermore, they overthrew the Tokugawa bakufu and built the emperor's government. Later usurped the daimyos territorial rights and used western models to modernize. This idea of "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" (尊王攘夷), led to the "Overthrow the Bakufu" (倒幕), and further to the "Abolition of Domain" (廢藩) and the "Civilization and Enlightenment" (文明開化). This explanation follows a single path. As for Choshu, it was most adequate, but in terms of the entire Meiji Restoration, it was not totally appropriate. If this were true, foreign wars and status struggles are far more severe than reality. The death toll would have been much greater than the figures we saw before. The interpretation below is rather complicated but will give a fuller understanding.

**(1) Corresponding to Western Threat with Technology:  
1853~1858**

During the six years from the arrival of Commodore Perry to the signing of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce, corresponding to the west, it became an era of technology. On the surface, political disputes did not occur. The Perry's treaty had not diplomatic nor commercial means, but it was an open port treaty. Under this semi-open door policy situation, daimyos, bushi warriors and the royal court, with the bakufu at the center managed to unify nationally. Popular at the time was military training or to acquire western knowledge and to spread the insights. But on the other hand, being forced to open, Japan suffered severe humiliation which increase opposition to bakufu's foreign policy. Where as major daimyos such as Mito and Satsuma state desired to participate officially in bakufu politics even before Perry's arrival they were cooperating with the bakufu pertaining defense issues.

**(2) Collapse of Political Order: 1858~1863**

In 1858, the bakufu proclaimed the renunciation of national isolation. Beginning of diplomacy and commercial exchange were attempted at this stage. When the emperor's royal court rejected this, the accumulated strain became distinct. Political movement opposing the bakufu surfaced. The bakufu's nation wide supreme command had been dealt a serious blow, to the point where repair was impossible.

This collapse of political order began with the political change in 1858, where two major problems surfaced abruptly. One was the validity of the treaty while the other dealt with the selection of a successor to the shogun. As for the latter issue, some of the major daimyo (Mito, Satsuma, Echizen and Tosa, referred as Hitotsubashi faction) supported [Hitotsubashi Yoshinobu as a soon to be successor to the shogun. His selection was to cover for the physically weak shogun and to a path for personal representation for political power. Actually the two issues have no correlation. But bakufu asked the royal court for the approval of the treaty. The Hitotsubashi faction also asked the royal court for cooperation to the successor issue; therefore, the two problems were united at the royal court and simultaneously a conflict between the royal court and bakufu evolved. At the same time, the bakufu was under the superintendence of Lord Hikone. He tried to defend the tradition of bakufu's autocracy, and decided the successor who was Hitotsubashi faction's opposition candidate and without the consent of the royal court, a treaty had been signed. To this, the Hitotsubashi faction, the royal court and expulsionist intellectuals opposed the decision. The leading personnel were later punished. This oppression on the surface gave the bakufu a higher authority, but on the other hand, this gave an impression of injustice of opening Japan and dislike for the bakufu was spread even further. For that reason, in 1860 Lord Hikone was assassinated by former vassals of Mito and Satsuma. After the assassination in 1858, there were movements to

rectify the bakufu's unpopular policy and to further oppose its monopoly of supremacy which spread rapidly.

At the time, three political movements had complicated the setting. They were "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement by the intellectuals, daimyo's "Unity of Court and Bakufu" movement and lastly bakufu's "Military Reform Plan." Bakufu's attempt was to organize a western navy and army, to strengthen its organizational functions. The objective was not to oppress the internal political movements, but to defend against western threat. But this plan was discontinued in 1862. The former Hitotsubashi faction daimyo, Echizen gained bakufu's authority with the support of the royal court and Satsuma, while "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement challenged bakufu's leadership. Former Hitotsubashi faction stressed that to revitalize political order, bakufu must rid its egoism and make peace with the royal court. Military reform was suspended and the government officials responsible for Lord Hikone's oppression were punished while the oppressed were set free. But they themselves failed. The "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement stated that unjust treaties should be abrogated, later seized Choshu and the royal court. They demanded war of expulsion which former Hitotsubashi faction could not accept. Temporarily this faction abandoned the support for the bakufu. Accordingly, in 1863 the political situation was placed under the hegemony of the expulsionist movement. They began the expulsion war at Shimonoseki, furthermore, planned a war to overthrow the bakufu.

During the second phase of Meiji Restoration, the bakufu's nation wide supremacy was remarkably hurt due to issues dealing with foreign relations and for the reaction to oppression. While the royal court was focused and appeared as a new political arena.

### (3) The Plan of a New Political Order: the last period of Bakufu's rule 1863~1868

When "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement changed its aim to overthrow the bakufu with Choshu at the center, there was a coup d'etat to oppose this movement. Not only representatives of the bakufu and members of former Hitotsubashi faction, but expulsion supporters of the royal court's upper class and daimyo also feared the possibility of a civil war breaking out. As a result, the anti-bakufu supporters were ousted from Kyoto. Later the issue which appeared was the reconstruction of political order. What type of government should be established was the major question. Concretely speaking, the Kogi system (公議政體) under emperor's authority, in other words government based on public opinion under emperor's authority, or bakufu and the royal court to come to terms and recognize bakufu's nation wide monopoly of supremacy as before. Self claimed Notable Daimyo, former Hitotsubashi faction members Satsume and Echizen pursued the former, in which Tokugawa still took the leadership. They recommended to the royal court to compromise with the bakufu and to accept the opening of the nation. Later demanded the bakufu for political participation as a reward. To this request, bakufu rejected the distribution of political supremacy. To win favors of the royal court, bakufu promised to close the largest trade port of Yokohama, which was virtually an impossible pledge at the time and compromised with the royal court without the council of notable daimyos. In 1864, the royal court approved the supremacy of the bakufu.

The system of "Unity of Court and Bakufu" (公武合體) was unstable. Choshu, a very active enemy still existed, and furthermore rewards for supportive council of notable daimyos were still undistributed and left abandoned. When Choshu failed to recapture Kyoto by force Satsuma and Echizen entered for a treatment after the incident. When the western nations requested for an imperial sanction of the treaty, it

was emphasized that the decision be entrusted to the council of notables. Bakufu rejected the proposal and began the military reform anew, to plan a takeover of daimyo domains in the future. At this point, Satsuma finally cooperated with Choshu state which had abandoned expulsionistic thoughts. As a result, in 1866, without any support of a major daimyo, bakufu attempted to punish Choshu but failed. Bakufu's defeat was a grand opportunity to institutionalize Kogi system. But the successor to Tokugawa shogunate, Hitotsubashi Yoshinobu obtained support from Emperor Kou Mei and defeated the stratagem of Satsuma and Echizen. The following year, after the emperor's death, a similar attempt had been made and skillfully refused. As a result, in 1867, the radicals within Satsuma state at last cooperated with Choshu and were determined to oppose bakufu by the use of arms.

With other notables such as Echizen and Tosa, they shared a common goal to organize the Kogi system, but it was decided that without the use of force, that plan will never materialize. On the contrary, pro-Tokugawa notables such as Tosa recommended Tokugawa Yoshinobu to voluntarily transfer the right to rule Japan to the royal court and to create the Kogi system. Tokugawa Yoshinobu accepted the recommendation to avoid war and to maintain influence within the new Kogi system with the support of pro-Tokugawa daimyos. In long terms he longed for a centralized government.

The third phase of Meiji Ishin evolved through the issues of bakufu and Choshu confrontation and treaties. The primary actors were notable daimyos and bakufu, where the former demanded institutionalization of Kogi system and the latter opposed this and hoped for centralization by improving military forces. During the process, confrontation of both sides advanced to a point where military clashes seemed inevitable, but instead, the image of a new political order seemed to resemble each other. Tokugawa agreed to the establishment of Kogi government. Radical vassals of Satsuma and Choshu began considering concentration after Kogi system was established. The issue fought at the last stage

was therefore not political form but gaining political influence of the new political order. In early 1868, through restoration coup and war in southwest Kyoto, a new government hegemony was grasped by the radical vassals of Satsuma and Choshu.

#### (4) Pursuing a New Political Order (Meiji) 1868~1871

Meiji government was a completely different organization compared to the traditional royal court in its structure and human components. Important positions were occupied by former nobilities, notables and vassals pursuing restoration. Furthermore, from all daimyo states capable personnel were gathered. This Kogi system was transferred from Kyoto to Tokyo (former Edo) within the year, and three years later the daimy system was abolished.

The first task was to force Tokugawa to surrender who had fled to Edo. Then, to extend its control throughout Japan, Meiji government organized daimyos under the name of "divine rule" and "Kogi" to punish the Tokugawa forces. But Tokugawa never resisted, since a prolonged civil war may invite western intervention. An unexpected war with daimyos of northern Japan had been subdued within six months.

The next issue was centralization. Leaders from Satsuma and Choshu once detecting the result of Boshin civil war (1868~1869), immediately planned for centralization. In 1869, under the name of restoration, Meiji government recovered the certificate of rule that Tokugawa shogun granted to various daimyos. At this time, each state of daimyo was divided into the public and private sectors. In principle the governor of the public sector was not chosen by heritage but at the instance former daimyos were appointed. The reform was conducted without any assurances of military power, but daimyos continued to rule the local regions as before and maintained a guarantee of a source of income. Furthermore, they were added to the Peerage status, along with the nobility. As a result, opposition never occurred. In 1874, the government finally abolished the daimyo states and they became an integrated

prefecture of the country. Former daimyo members at this time were dismissed as governors and forced to relocate in Tokyo. They were severed from the position of power completely. Also, former bushi were relieved of their post as officials during the process of administrative unification of the prefectures. Most of them were rehired as before although they had been hurt by salary reduction due to heritage and once again were hindered gravely. Even though, the members of bushi class obeyed the decision made by the government. One of the conditional terms was that political leaders from Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa were united on this reform. Some of the major daimyo states established large scale military forces on the occasion of Boshin civil war. They were a threat to Meiji government, therefore the leaders gathered the military forces from regional domains to Tokyo and placed them directly under government command. The abolition of Daimyo states was accepted without any opposition.

**(5) Modernization and Abolition of the Old Regime: 1871~1877**

Meiji government continued the radical reforms even after great success at the earlier stage. The social reforms followed western models on the one hand, settled debts of daimyo states, abolished but compensated income by heritage of Peerage and former bushi. But travels abroad of primary leaders and the emergence of "Seikanron" (Plan to Punish Korea) eventually led to leadership split. While Satsuma and Choshu leaders were abroad, Tosa and Saga leaders usurped authority and along with Saigo Takamori, who was the leader of Satsuma forces, planned to punish Korea. The returned leaders opposed this plan due to the dangers involved. The split within the government in 1873 was won by the anti-Seikanron group, but some of the ousted pro-Seikanron group leaders of Tosa and Saga requested for an assembly by popular vote. Anti-Seikanron group leaders had been considering the introduction of constitutional politics and in 1875, in principle they agreed to the proposal due to the fear of isolation. On the other hand, Saigo and

pro-Seikanron military personnel of Satsuma returned to their local districts and gathered strength. But in 1877, they being deprived of special privileges had caused a major rebellion. On this occasion, the government put down the rebellion by troops of drafted soldiers. The result was an absolute end to the former bushi class to start an armed revolt. Later came the era of industrialization and constitutional government.

### Part 3. The Role of Nationalism

The changes of political system during Meiji Ishin, in other words, the breakdown [of order and reintegration had very little sacrifice compared to the scale of this reform. Also, this procedure was comparatively quick. The establishment of a new political system and stabilization took approximately 20 years. Compared to France, Russia and China this process can be stated as making a rapid transformation. This type of distinctive characteristic was due to favorable international surroundings and for the nature of Tokugawa state. Division of power and authority, multipolarization of power all eased the process of dissolving political order without disturbing social order. Also, the nation wide social integration under Pax-Tokugawa furnished the foundation for political integration. National market united not only the urban cities with rural towns, but also rural towns with other rural towns. The development of private courier system and publishers can be seen as an improvement of communication network which produced a sense of unity above the daimyo states across the Japanese populace. At this point I will analyze how nationalism which developed on this base influenced the process of dissolving and reintegration of Tokugawa state.

Political movements which promoted Meiji Ishin possessed a strong sense of nationalism, but chiasm and democratic ideologies were non-existent. Such slogans as "Sonno joi" (Revere the Emperor, Expel the

Barbarians), "Kogi" (Public Opinion), "Osei Fukko" (Return to Imperial Rule), "Gunken" (Concentration), "Fukoku Kyohei" (Rich Country, Strong Army), "Bunmei Kaika" (Civilization and Enlightenment), were against pressures from the west, and what should be done in order for Japan to maintain its independence. All these slogans were based on this thought and at this point finally justified. Needless to say, claims of "Benevolence" and "Good Government" were also made, but these thoughts were in relation to the fundamental issue.

During this period numerous mass disturbances occurred. Included was "Yonaoshi" (World Renewal) movement which expressed chiliasm ideology. It was never to overthrow or usurp authority nor to be a representative in the field of politics. The masses involved in political movements, generally were aroused by nationalism and related themselves to authority. In many cases, they were recruited by the military. Also during this restoration period, the masses had no knowledge of western political thoughts. The interest for democracy was aroused after the government abolished status order and inspired by the establishment of mass media apparatus of newspapers and magazines. This arena of political struggle lacking chiliasm and democracy limited the restoration political nucleus to the elites. Nationalism was hoisted as the sole reform ideology.

Now, what influence did nationalism have on Meiji Restoration. First of all, it cut off foreign intervention and restricted the parties concerned to only Japanese. Internal powers cooperating with foreign nations were considered as traitors and as a result, it was limited to a minimum. Bakufu had asked for financial support of the French government at the late period, but due to French decisions the support never materialized. Also, Meiji government employed numerous westerners for acquiring western knowledges, but they never possessed any decision making rights. However, the popularity of nationalism tempted expulsion movements and aggression. The expulsion behavior of Choshu or "Seikanron" of Meiji government are major examples. But western

nations corresponded to the expulsion wars with restraint and as for "Seikanron", realist leaders returning from the west rejected this risky proposal. Thus, no western intervention occurred.

Secondly, nationalism made criticism against the government easy and effective. Living within the status order, at the time for most people, the rule of bakufu was difficult to criticize. But with outside pressure leading to the opening of the country, this act of disgrace to the Japan can be easily criticized. According to historical facts, during 19th century Japan, this type of criticism against the government was fatal. It was due to the following conditions. First, after experiencing the tension of threat from Russia in the early 19th century, there were precautions for the west and at the same time the feeling of self respect increased. The claim of expulsion received wide sympathy. Secondly, there was the consciousness that the emperor was the ultimate authority, and for foreign relations, the emperor's consent was necessary. Therefore, "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement claimed that bakufu's open the country policy as a violation to official duties, which was to "Conquer the Barbarians." Also, while bakufu signed the treaty without the consent of the royal court, it denounced that bakufu invaded the divine authority of the emperor. Therefore, bakufu lost its argument along with prestige. "Honor the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" movement compared to its real strength, gained enormous destructive power against the nation wide rule of bakufu. The reason behind this can be seen as the above.

Thirdly, by stressing the existence of outside enemies, nationalism suppressed the magnification of political disputes. Moreover, efforts to reintegrate were formed. A good example is the Boshin civil war. It never matched the original enemies of Satsuma and Choshu against Tokugawa in a major battle, but only minor battles were fought. This was due to both parties wanting to avoid a prolonged war, considering they didn't want the western nations to have an opportunity to intervene. On the other hand, reunification movements definitely had a

center which was the royal court. At the time, for the populace, emperor was viewed as the symbol of Japan's historic and national unity. Therefore, when this questionable leadership of the bakufu occurred, the royal court was utilized for reconstruction of political order. Even if Tokugawa controlled the hegemony for the Kogi system, there is no doubt that Tokugawa tried to monopolize the emperor's authority. Regardless, during Meiji restoration, from the beginning of dismantling of political order there was a nation wide consent what place should be the nucleus of concentration instead of existing power of authority.

Fourthly, nationalism eased the process of redistribution of rights. Challenges to special privileges became indirect and the cautiousness of the elites were mitigated. It can be observed in the relationship of "Honor the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" with the collapse of nation wide supremacy of the bakufu. But the most important case was status order being abolished. It began with the selection of capable individuals without reforming status order itself in the name of national defense. Next, during the expulsion war and the revolts, Choshu, Satsuma, and bakufu were forced to strengthen their organizational functions. At the same time they were forced to make financial arrangements. The Boshin civil war affected virtually all the daimyos in the same fashion. Once it was over, through organization and heritage income reform, the bushi status order was simplified considerably. The centralization process that Meiji government carried out also had a by-product that bushi's occupation by heritage was deprived. The daimyo gave up their authority for the cause of restoration, in exchange for guarantee of livelihood and honor. Bushi had lost their positions during the administrative changes. The government followed by depriving them of heritage income which prompted revolts. But that was only possible for the ex-government forces that created a strong sense of unity after the Boshin civil war. Throughout the entire restoration period, bushi had no opportunity of cooperation to resist the deprivation of their

privileges. If people oppressed by the status order demanded a movement of equality, or lower bushi challenged daimyo and elder satesman, the result might have been entirely different. But that situation never existed, and the bushi silently followed the demands of the authority which were skillfully arranged by the government leaders.

Everyone will now acknowledge that during Meiji Restoration, nationalism played a vital role. The objective of this paper was to analyze the functions of nationalism during the process and outcome of Meiji Restoration. It will be an honor if fellow scholars of various specializations and cultural backgrounds can further their knowledge from this paper.